

Jim & Jo Tunnell ■ Junction Image Co.

Mailing: [REDACTED] Big Bear City, CA 92315

February 3, 2011

Jon H. Weston
Federal Aviation Administration
[REDACTED]
Riverside, CA 92504

Dear Mr. Weston:

This letter is in response to our phone conversation earlier today, to confirm the information I relayed to you about the aircraft involved in the January 30th incident here in Big Bear City, in which a twin-engine plane crashed into a home.

I live, as the “crow flies”, about a block and a half N/NE (see above address) of the east end of the Big Bear City Airport runway. My husband and I are no strangers to the sights and sounds of aircraft coming and going from the airport, after over 30 years of being its neighbor, and for the most part, enjoying watching the planes.

On the morning of January 30th, I was in my home office, working on the computer, when I heard a plane preparing for take-off sometime between 7:15 and 7:30 a.m. (I’m sorry I cannot be more precise about the time). Because we are accustomed to the airport traffic, there would have been something unusual about the sound of this particular plane to capture my attention as it did. The plane was clearly at the east end of the runway, doing its run-ups/warm-ups for takeoff on Runway 26 (or else I would not have been able to hear it). The aircraft was loud – which tells me it was a twin as opposed to a single-engine plane.

The other unusual thing was that there was a series of “popping” noises accompanying the engine noise. My initial unconscious thought was, “Wow, that thing is really backfiring,” because the sound was the same thing I often hear when planes are on approach for landing, and the pilot lets off the gas, and (per my husband), the engine backfires. Almost as soon as I had this thought, it stuck me that I shouldn’t be hearing that from a plane getting ready to take OFF. I started listening more closely, and the “popping” was continuous – probably a series of a dozen or so rapid pop-pop-pop-pops, then a pause (presumably when the pilot let off the gas), then it would start again as the engine revved again. This continued for about two straight minutes as the plane warmed up.

At that point – since it made no sense to me that someone would be preparing to take off with an engine running like that – I actually wondered if I was hearing gunshots instead of a plane, since the sound was similar to what one would hear from a small caliber gun

being fired rapidly. I got up from my desk and started toward the front door, thinking, “If the stupid plane would just leave, I could hear what’s going on,” when I heard the plane rev up to a constant level and begin to take off. As it did, the “popping” sounds became less prominent, in direct proportion to the sound of the engine becoming more distant (as the plane rolled down the runway), and it was clear to me the “popping” was coming from the plane.

I was not even aware there had been a plane crash until later in the morning when I read it on a local online news source. I knew the location immediately (it is also about a block and a half from us), and it was clear the plane was coming in for a landing on Runway 26 when the accident occurred, so I didn’t immediately make any connection with the plane that I had heard take off. It was not until later in the day when a news source indicated that the airplane involved in the accident had taken off from the airport, experienced trouble, and was trying to get back to the airport when it went down – that I realized it may have been the aircraft I heard take off and decided I needed to report what I had heard. Initially, I left a message at the SoCal NTSB office, and when they did not return my call, I contacted your office this morning.

I’m no aviation expert, but we have several friends who are private pilots, and I know a little more than the average person, and even at the time, when I realized it was in fact the aircraft making the popping/backfiring noises, I found it incredible that any reasonable pilot would have taken off in an airplane running as that one was.

Also, as we discussed on the phone: I have an acquaintance who lives at the west end of the Valley here, near “The Village” area, who indicated he was walking to his car on Saturday and heard an incoming plane overhead that was “popping” and backfiring in much the same way. It got his attention, thinking “That guy isn’t going to make it,” and he looked up and it was a twin-engine aircraft. I have been trying to reach him to determine the approximate time of his observation, and at such time that he responds and gives me permission to do so, I will forward you his contact information if his information seems at all relevant.

Per our conversation, along with this letter, I am forwarding you via e-mail a link to an undated article from the L.A. Times in which a Nato Flores, age 52 at the time of the writing, was profiled as owner of Tower General Contractors, the business to which the aircraft in the accident was registered. In the article it states, “Recent Splurge: Bought a used \$60,000 trainer plane, crashed it, and got another. Plans to buy a bigger one soon.” If the subject of the article is the pilot in the Big Bear City incident, it is clear this is not his first aviation accident. There is some confusion on my part at this point as to the pilot’s identity, as one media source identified the pilot of the aircraft in the accident as Natilio Flores, and others have identified him as Narvidao Flores Cortez, so I am unsure if this is the same individual in the article, but it would appear to be worth looking into.

I sincerely appreciate your interest in the information I offered, whether it is eventually relevant or not. If you have any further questions, feel free to contact me via e-mail at [REDACTED] or by phone at [REDACTED]

Regards,

Jo Tunnell